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ABSTRACT

Meaningful use of language involves intending to have an effect and intending the audience to recognize that aim. In a Freudian modification of this premise, allowing for different levels of intentional awareness, writing can be discussed in terms of how writers intend to affect readers, as well as how aware they are themselves of their intentions and how aware they want their readers to be of these intentions. An example of these considerations is the question of how much the power structure in the student-teacher relationship affects what students write and how knowingly students write for teachers as the "authority." In psychoanalysis, the "authority" of analysts resides in the phenomena of transference (dependence) and countertransference (fostering that dependence). Once freed of this "transference," clients are able to see their own motivations more clearly. This analogy suggests that neither students nor teachers should allow teachers special authority over student ideas. It does not suggest, however, that the asymmetric student teacher relationship should be totally dismantled. Teachers can abdicate authority in the writing sphere to encourage student insight and freedom, yet retain it in the literary sphere. (HTH)

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Developing the Relation of Author to Idea,

or,

Curing the Student-Writer's Transference Neurosis

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In preparing these remarks I was constantly aware that I was preparing them for an audience most of whom were certain to work in disciplines different from my own; perhaps that is why I feel a need to begin by being as clear as I can be about what I will and what I won't be trying to do.

I am a psychologist with some research experience in psycholinguistics, and I have been involved with Saint Mary's College's "across the curriculum" writing program. But I won't be bringing the results of psycholinguistic experimentation to bear on the problem of how better to teach people to write. Nor will I discuss the ways I've tried to incorporate writing pedagogy into my psychology classes.

Instead I'll try to convey one psychologist's perspective on one kind of learning that can take place in and through the writing process. The scope of my remarks is meant to be rather sharply circumscribed, as I'll try to make clear in a few moments. It may, in fact, be at least a few moments before it becomes clear in just what sense I'm dealing with my nominal topic, the relationship between the author and her subject.

As background, it will be useful to mention a few ideas from the philosophy of the speech act, all of which transfer readily to a discussion of the "writing act". I'll adopt an essentially rhetorical orientation, considering language use from the point of view of how the user intends his or her use

of language to affect the recipient of the message. The particular theoretical development of that perspective which I wish to employ comes from the work of the British philosopher H. P. Grice, who in a series of papers (1957, 1967, 1968, 1969) has articulated a view of what it means to mean something.

According to Grice, to mean something by one's use of language is to intend to produce some specific effect on some specific audience, and to intend that that effect be achieved at least partially by virtue of the audience's recognition of what effect one intended to produce. That somewhat peculiar self-reflexive property – having an intention whose fulfillment consists at least in part in its being recognized – serves to distinguish communicative purposes from the variety of other ways we might intend to have an effect on someone.

To take one rather simple and unsubtle example, one might use words to get someone to jump in (at least) two distinct ways: in the first, we creep quietly up behind our "audience" and yell something (anything) suddenly and loudly, intending to have the effect of getting the audience to jump. Alternatively we might speak a sentence whose purpose is to get the audience to recognize that we want for them to recognize that we want them to jump, and that we want them to jump because of their recognition that that is what we intended. The latter is, and the former is not, communication.

This Gricean concept, that our meaningful use of language involves intending to have an effect, and intending in some essential way for the audience to recognize our intention for what it is, is central to the line of thought I'm pursuing. But I'd suggest (and I have, at greater length in another paper (Micham, 1982)) a Freudian-flavored modification of Grice's theory. In particular, if we allow, as Grice did not, for different levels of awareness of intentions, then we can discuss an act of writing not only in terms of how the writer intends to affect her reader (a la Grice), but also in terms of

(1) how aware the writer is of her own intentions with regard to the reader, and

(2) how aware she intends the reader to be of her intent.

A seemingly simple example of such considerations, but one that's especially relevant to my thesis, is the question of the extent to which the (real or imagined) power structure in the student-teacher relationship affects what the student writes, and the related question of how knowingly the student writes to the teacher as authority. The rest of my remarks will be devoted to exploring that issue.

Let's suppose that one valued aim of a writing assignment is that it stimulates the student to articulate her own attitude or thoughts about the topic in ways, or to an extent, that she may not have articulated them before, even to herself;

i.e., suppose (noncontroversially, I hope) that an aim of writing in courses is a form of self-discovery.

Assuming further (and perhaps at our own peril!) that the student does have an idea, does think something, about the topic at hand, then the previous remarks suggest that what the student writes about that topic will be determined, in ways of which neither student nor teacher may be fully aware, by both her relationship to her topic and her relationship to the teacher's authority.

More explicitly, what I am suggesting is that there is something inherent in the purposive use of language that contributes to a confounding of the question of what is the student's relationship to her topic, something inherent in communication itself which, left unexamined, is bound to frustrate the valued aim which we've assumed writing has, an increase in self-knowledge.

To a psychologist, at least to one of certain theoretical persuasions, the preceding observations suggest at least a formal parallel between the pedagogical context and the psychoanalytic. My last few minutes will be given to developing that parallel; we may also at least begin to ask how purely "formal" the analogy is, or whether there may be some deeper dynamic basis for it.

In psychoanalysis, any so-called 'authority' of the analyst resides in the phenomena of transference and counter-transference. Whether this means that the patient merely passively depends on the analyst to diagnose and cure what's wrong, or whether it means seeing one's analyst as a knowledge-able, protective, and comforting "father figure", or whether it takes a more overtly erotic form such as the patient's falling in love with the analyst, such an interpersonal relationship in the therapeutic context is seen as fundamentally neurotic, and a hindrance (though, ironically, also a vehicle!) to the patient's insight. One expression of the goal of psychoanalytic treatment is to bring the patient to the point of being able to be her own analyst. This entails, among other things, freeing her of the erroneous belief that the analyst possesses the solution to her problem. Once freed of this 'transference', the client is in a position to see more clearly than before what her own motives for her actions really are, uncolored by the client-analyst relationship.

I'd be surprised if the general shape of my analogy hasn't begun to appear to you by now: the logic of this path down which I'm urging you suggests that it is fallacious (dare I say "neurotic"??) for either student or teacher to suppose that the teacher has any special authority regarding the question of the student's relationship to the idea she's writing about.

The implication that now presents itself is that if the writing process is to serve the end which I've assumed has value — greater self-awareness — then both student and teacher need to work at undermining the teacher's authority; this "pedagogical transference" stands as an obstacle to the student's learning to learn about herself by herself, i.e., learning to be her own teacher, which completes the analogy with the patient's goal of becoming capable of being her own analyst.

At this point I'd like to make a few concluding remarks, all of them brief and incomplete, but all of them addressed to things to which I'd be delighted to return later during discussion:

First, I've said nothing about how to go about "curing the student-writer's transference neurosis". Permit me the obvious evasion of claiming no special authority here. I suspect that here as in psychoanalytic treatment each client's "cure" must begin with her symptoms and her life, and claw its way from there. There are all too many symptoms that we're all too well acquainted with; we all have seen the variety of hedges and weaslings, the variety of devices our students employ in order to write wimpy and unassertive papers, the ways of avoiding committment and the acceptance of personal responsibility for a point of view

Second, although my title refers to transference as the student's neurosis, it should be clear that the teacher is at risk for the complementary disorder. It is all too easy and ego-gratifying to allow ourselves to be drawn into colluding with the student's 'neurosis', but such collusion is "counter-transference" and is to be avoided.

Next, I've said that I intend the scope of my argument to be rather sharply delimited; if I don't do that now it won't get done. Specifically, I'm not urging the total dismantling of the traditionally asymmetric student-teacher relationship. Indeed there are many cases where I'll defend my authority, for instance where I see clearly that the student has misread an author and so has totally missed the author's point. I'd merely note in this regard that I see no inconsistency in trying in trying to abdicate authority in one sphere while trying to retain it in other spheres. No inconsistency in principle, at any rate, although certainly in execution there are thin and slippery lines to be trod.

And finally: Socrates, of course, taught the radical impossibility of teaching. So did Freud, who listed teaching and governing as impossible professions along with healing, Freud's own impossible profession. I'd like to note the relevance here of a very interesting recent article by Shoshana Felman (1982), a student of the late French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Felman discusses the relatedness of the

impossibilities of teaching and healing, arguing for a dynamic connection between the concepts of ignorance and the unconscious. From this point of view the parallel which I've described as "at least formal" becomes much more than merely formal, as psychoanalysis becomes profoundly a process of education in self-knowledge, and learning to know oneself becomes the process of examining one's motivations. It may be appropriate to conclude this paper with a reminder that education has its etymological roots in a process of drawing-out.

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